

**Foe is cunning
but God is strong**



Lev Tolstoy

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In the old time there lived a good master. He had much of everything, and many slaves served him. And the slaves praised their master. They said: "There is no master better than our master under heaven. He clothes and feeds us well, and gives us work to do according to our strength; he offends none by word, and bears no grudge for anything. He is not like other masters who torment their slaves and treat them worse than cattle, and punish them whether they commit faults or not, and have not a good word to say to them. Our master has our welfare at heart, and does good to us, and speaks well to us. We want no better life than the life we lead"

Thus did the slaves praise their master. And the Devil was wroth because the slaves lived so well, and in all loving-kindness with their master. And the Devil took possession of one of the slaves of this master, whose name was Aleb. He took possession of him, and bade him offend the other slaves. And when the other slaves were resting from their labours and praising their master, Aleb also lifted up his voice and said:

"Vainly do you praise the goodness of our master, my brethren. Try and please the Devil, and the Devil will do you good. We serve our master well, we please him in everything. Whatever he fancies that we do for him, we anticipate his thoughts. How can he help being good to us? But just cease to please, and do him evil, then you'll find he'll be like all the rest of them, and will render evil for evil even worse than the bad masters do."

And the other slaves began to dispute with Aleb. And they disputed and laid a wager together. And Aleb undertook to provoke the good master to anger. He undertook to do so on this condition: that if he did not provoke him to anger he should lose his festival garment, but if he did provoke him to anger they promised that each one of them should give him his festival garment; and besides that they promised to defend him against his master, and if he put him in irons or thrust him into a dungeon they said they would loose him. So they laid their wager, and the next morning Aleb promised to provoke his master to anger.

Aleb served his master in the sheep-folds and took charge of the costly breeding rams. And behold! in the morning, when the good master came to the sheep-folds with his guests and began to show them his dear and precious rams, the Devil's labourer signified to his comrades: "Look now, I'll provoke my master to anger instantly." All the slaves assembled. They looked through doors and over fences, and the Devil ran up a tree, and looked down from thence into the yard to see how his servant would serve him. The master entered the yard and showed his guests his sheep and his lambs, and wanted to show them his best ram. "The other rams are good," said he, "but this is one with strong horns; he is priceless, and more precious to me than my own eyes." The sheep and rams rushed about the yard because of the people, and the guests could not distinguish the precious ram amongst them. No sooner did this ram stand still than the Devil's labourer, as if by accident, scared the sheep, and again they were all intermingled. The guests could not distinguish the ram that was priceless. And the master began to be wearied" Aleb, my dear friend," said he, "see thou to this! Catch the best ram with the strong horns very warily and hold him fast."

And no sooner had the master said this than Aleb flung himself like a lion in the middle of the lambs and sheep, and seized the priceless ram by his shorn fleece. He seized it by the shorn fleece, and immediately clasped it round its left hind leg with one of his hands, lifted it up, and right before the very eyes of his master, tugged the leg violently upwards, and it snapped like the peeled branch of a young linden-tree. Aleb had broken the leg of the good ram below the knee. The ram began to bleat, and fell down on its front knees. Aleb seized it by the right leg, and the left leg turned inwards and hung down like a short whip. The guests and all the slaves groaned, and the Devil rejoiced when he saw how cleverly Aleb had done his deed. The master turned as black as night, he frowned, cast down his head, and said not a word. The guests and the slaves were silent. They wanted to see what would happen. The master was silent for a time, then he shook himself as if he wanted to shake off something, raised his head, and fixed his eyes on heaven. Not long did he look, his wrinkles disappeared from his face, and he smiled and cast his eyes upon Aleb. He looked at Aleb, smiled, and Said:

"Oh, Aleb, Aleb! Your master ordered you to anger me. But my master is

stronger than yours, and you have not angered me, but I have angered your master. You feared that I would punish you, and you wished to be free, Aleb; know, therefore, that I will not punish you, but as you desires your freedom, look now! In the presence of my guests I release you, you are free to follow your own will. Depart wherever you wish, to the four corners of the earth, and take your festival garment with your!"

And the good master went home with his guests. But the Devil gnashed his teeth, glided down the tree, and vanished through the earth.